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HONK, HONK!!

horty McCabe
at the Wheel



By SEWELL FORD



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SAN DIEGO

Wish all best
birthday wishes
Rosalind

April 14 - 1910.



BY SEWELL FORD

CHERUB DEVINE

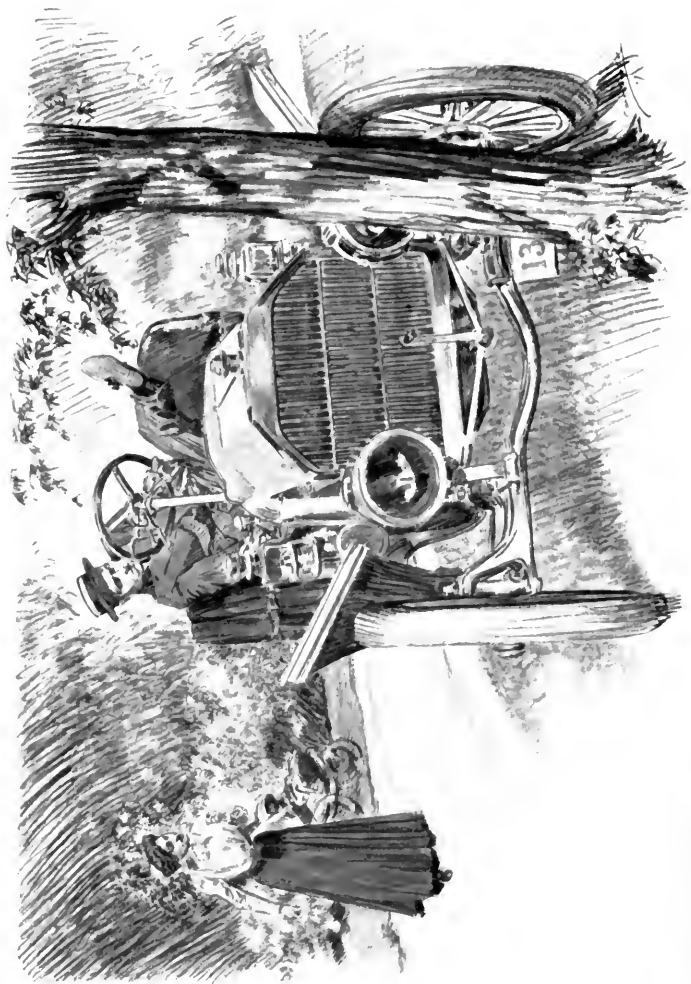
SHORTY McCABE

SIDE-STEPPING WITH SHORTY

HORSES NINE

TRUEGATE OF MOGADOR





NEXT THING I KNEW I WAS MAKING FULL TILT AT A BIG MAPLE.

HONK, HONK!!

SHORTY McCABE
AT THE WHEEL

by Sewell Ford

Illustrations by F. Vaux Wilson



NEW YORK
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MCMIX

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To

T. S. F.

who broke into the Honk Class
along with me and
knows how it
really was.

HONK, HONK!

I

SAY, I've got it, all right. No, not the made-in-Germany measles, or the pip, but something 'most as common. More'n that, I'm glad of it. All that bothers me now is, just when it was I swallowed the bug.

The best I can do is to trace it all back to that combination of Zenas and Mr. Tidwell. The only line you need on Zenas is that he was a bacon-tinted gent from the West Indies that Sadie hired by the month to run her car.

Excuse me if I don't dwell on Zenas.

HONK, HONK!

Sadie's managed to pick some mighty punk specimens of the shuffer tribe first and last, and we've had our troubles with 'em; but this St. Thomas Island party with the breakfast-meat complexion had more curly black hair on his head, and less gray matter underneath the skull, than any two-legged article of his size I ever saw outside of a cage. Add to that a lazy streak that was bone deep, and a chronic case of sulks, and maybe you won't wonder why Zenas didn't hold his job longer.

What got me so grouchy on him, though, was because we didn't even have the satisfaction of firin' him. About once a week reg'lar we threatened to tie the can to Zenas, and it was a pleasure I was kind of savin' up and lookin' forward to.

HONK, HONK!

And then one day, just as Sadie was ready to make a train for town, havin' notified Mr. Zenas an hour before, up comes word that he's quit. Mother Whaley brings in the bulletin.

"What's that?" says Sadie. "Why didn't he say so when I paid him this mornin'? Why, the—the——"

"Never mind thinkin' up any fancy pet names, Sadie," says I. "You couldn't do the subject justice. Just wait until I go out there and unlimber a few of the bottled-up remarks I've been keepin' in so long."

But Zenas has counted on that, and all there is left to remind us of him is an old cap and some empty cigarette boxes. And there's the big limousine, standin' there just waitin' for some one that knew how to

HONK, HONK!

touch her off; also the train was due in six minutes. Sadie's followed me out to remind me of that.

"It's a pity you can't run a car, Shorty," says she.

"Yes, or play the zither, or walk a slack wire," says I. "And think how handy I'd be around the house if I'd added practical plumbing and shoe cobblin' to my other accomplishments."

Oh, I passed it off light and easy enough, and we 'phones for a depot hack to take her to the next train; but somehow the remark sort of lingered. It didn't worry me so much at the time; but every now and then it would bob up and I'd think it over.

II

THEN a few mornin's later, as I was pikin' down to the station, I hears this small-sized riot going on in the front yard of Mr. Tidwell, a neighbor that has the cute little stucco cottage four houses down the road from us.

Course, I hangs up along the hedge and gawps over to see what's goin' on. And there's Tidwell, planted behind the steerin' wheel of a brand new, shiny tourin' car, just out of the shop. First off I thought he was tryin' to yank the steerin' post out by the roots; but then I see he's tryin' to turn the thing around in the drive-

HONK, HONK!

way without climbin' the shade trees or damagin' the shrubbery.

He seems to have plenty of help, for Mrs. Tidwell and two maids and the Italian who cuts his grass was all strung out around the lawn shoutin' at him, each one offerin' a diff'rent piece of advice as to what he ought to do next.

"Back up some more, Lovey!" sings out Mrs. Tidwell, wavin' her arms.

"Plenty of room ahead to the right, sir!" hollers one of the maids.

Well, I had to grin. You would too, if you'd seen the desp'rate look on Tidwell's face as he grips that wheel and stares from one to the other. He's one of these thin, washed-out, soft-spoken, spectacled gents, Tidwell is—he's the lace expert for some

HONK, HONK!

big department store, so Sadie says—and he looks about as well qualified for the job he's tackled as a speckled hen tryin' to hatch out a setting of kitchen alarm clocks.

First he fumbles with one of the side levers, and gets the engine to going like a steam rock drill. Then he tries another, and the machine gives a lunge forward that almost butts one of the maids into a geranium bed. I watches the circus until I hears the eight-seventeen express whistle, before breakin' into a trot for the station, and the last glimpse I had of Tidwell he was mixed up with a lawn swing and a lilac bush, and the Italian was tryin' to climb a tree.

“I hear Tidwell has a car,” says one of our commuters as I drops into the smoker.

HONK, HONK!

“He had, up to three minutes ago,” says I; “but the prospects are that he’ll finish the week with some scrap iron and a few splinters. Say, I’m coming home early to watch him perform.”

Honest, the thoughts of him kept me chucklin’ most of the day, and that afternoon on the back trip I speculated all the way out on what his place must be lookin’ like by then. I walks up the Post Road with my grin all set to spring, when all of a sudden I hears a horn honk behind me, and the next thing I know along sails Tidwell in his new car, bent a little forward with a strangle hold on the wheel and his eyes bugged out like a couple of peeled onions, but drivin’ along at a 20-mile clip

HONK, HONK!

and keepin' in the middle of the road. He's all alone, too.

“ Well, I'll be dipped in glue! ” says I, or words to that effect. “ Think of it! Tidwell! ”

You know how you're apt to size up a man for a weak sister, and suspect him of bein' one of the kind that lets his wife buy his neckties? Why, I hadn't credited Tidwell with havin' any more spine than a piece of pickled tripe, and as for his havin' nerve enough to run an automobile all by himself—well, it was one on the plexus for me.

Course, you see all sorts of people handlin' steerin' wheels, from ten-year-old kids up; but somehow I've always looked

HONK, HONK!

on it as kind of a freak trick, like bein' able to walk on your hands, or wigglin' your ears. But Tidwell! And the funny anecdote about him I'd framed up to hand to Sadie was put on the ice. I didn't even mention Tidwell.

III

THEN, was it Fate, or just my feet, that took me for a stroll up around Columbus Circle the next afternoon? Anyway, I forgot how I happened to stray so far uptown. All I know is that I was walkin' around towards Broadway, when I hears some one sing out:

“Hey, Shorty, old sport!”

And, as I whirls around, up to the curb glides a slick little red roadster, and I discovers Mr. Cecil Slattery shovin' out the glad hand.

“How're they coming?” says he.

“In bunches, Slat,” says I. “I expect

HONK, HONK!

you're gettin' 'em in carload lots, as usual?"

"Yes, yes, brother," says he. "I'm one of the busy little honey gatherers, you know, and the world is my clover top."

"Yes, I know," says I, "and the parties you light on gen'rally gets stung."

"Haw, haw!" says Cecil, lettin' it out free and joyful.

That's him all the time, one of the smoothest, cherkiest, nerviest young gents that you can find along Gasolene Row, which is sayin' a good deal.

Five or six years ago, Slat was assistant wiper in one of these second-hand automobile garages, with grease on him from his red hair down to his run-over heels, and he knew just enough about machinery to

HONK, HONK!

chew the head off a nut with a Stillson wrench and wear a pair of overalls that would stand alone.

He was cussed and kicked around by everyone in the place; but he kept on comin' back with that impudent grin of his, and monkeyin' with broken down old oil eaters, until he got so he knew the insides of diff'rent makes like a Tammany leader knows his wards.

It wa'n't until he was promoted to salesman, though, that Slat's talents got full swing. Why, he's admitted to me himself that he's booked more orders than any other three men on the Row. And to see him now, in his college-cut clothes, and his natty straw hat, and his lemon-colored silk shirt with the turned-back cuffs, you'd

HONK, HONK!

never suspicion he used to wear my old sweaters.

“What brand of speed destroyer is that you’ve got there?” I says. “Is it another triumph-of-the-century, top-notch, ne-plus-ulster, eh?”

“We-e-ell,” says Slat, kind of hesitatin’, “it’s a fine little car for the money; but I wouldn’t want to say it was the best ever. I’d call it a good second, though.”

“What!” says I, gaspin’. “You in a machine that don’t lay over anything that ever run on rubber? Are you joshin’, or have you got paralysis of the tongue? Maybe, though, it belongs to somebody else.”

No, it was his machine, one he’d been usin’ for a demonstrator all the spring, a

HONK, HONK!

present from the president of the company after he'd turned in his one hundred and first order. But, the fact of the matter was, he was changin' firms. It seems he'd just signed a contract with another concern, that put out a really high grade, classy line, and although he wouldn't take on the new job until he came back from his little trip abroad, he'd already begun to hedge on his patter.

“Of course,” says Slat, “for a medium-priced machine, this leads the list, and—” But right there he stops, and I notices his eyes narrow down thoughtful. “Say, Shorty,” he goes on, smooth as butter, “do you want to pick up this little beauty off the bargain counter?”

HONK, HONK!

“Ah, throw in your reverse!” says I. “I’m no clover blossom, Slat. Besides, what would I do with it; put it in the parlor?”

“Why not use it to burn gasoline with?” says he.

“Out of my line,” says I. “I couldn’t any more run the thing than a frog can fly.”

“You’ve got hands and feet, haven’t you?” says he.

“Yes, but they ain’t trained to do monkey stunts,” says I.

“Give ’em a course, then,” says he.

“No use, Slat,” says I. “The machinery and jugglin’ talents don’t run in our family, and I take it you’ve got to have a little of both to manipulate one of them hustle

HONK, HONK!

wagons. I couldn't learn in a month of washdays."

"So-o-o?" says he. "Well, you just jump in here with me."

"Said the spider to the fat blue-bottle, eh?" I breaks in. "Gwan, you red-headed he-siren, you! Think you can yogi me into buyin' something I ain't got no more use for than a parrot has for tooth powder?"

"Now that's all right, Shorty," says he, puttin' on an injured air. "You've got a right to your suspicions, and they do me credit. But this is once when you're running down your signals."

"Huh!" says I. "And then?"

"Do you suppose for a moment," he goes on, "that I would try to unload anything on you that you didn't want? Why,

HONK, HONK!

you and I have known each other for——”

“ ‘There, there, Slat!’ ” says I. “ ‘Don’t overwork the tear ducts. What might be this sudden spasm you’re strugglin’ with?’ ”

“ ‘Why,’ ” says he, lookin’ sort of sad and crushed, “ ‘I simply want to show you where you’re mistaken about having a subnormal intelligence. You say you can’t learn to run a car. I’d like to prove to you that you can, that’s all.’ ”

Well, I ain’t one to blight the happiness and peace of mind of a fellow being so careless and casual as all that.

“ ‘Slat,’ ” says I, “ ‘cheer up. I’m going to give you a chance to do your worst.’ ”

So with that I climbs into the empty bucket seat beside him, and off we goes up towards Riverside Drive.

IV

AS we hums along, swingin' in and out of the trolley tracks, grazin' a truck here and a street car there, Slat gives me a rapid-fire lecture on how it's done.

Got me kind of int'rested too, and before we strikes the Manhattan Viaduct I had the whole program by heart. You know that new piece they've added to the drive up beyond 157th Street? We'd just got straightened out on that, when he jams on his brake, fetches up with the engine still throbbin', and slides out from behind the wheel.

HONK, HONK!

“Here, now,” says he, “you do it.”

“Eh?” says I. “Me?”

“You got a fifty-foot roadway all to yourself,” says he. “Why not try?”

Honest, I was ashamed to let on how chilly my feet had gone all of a sudden; so I slips into his place and he takes mine.

“Now let’s see,” says I, runnin’ over the directions out loud. “You push forward on this side thingumbob, put your foot on that left pedal, and bring this handle back a few notches.”

As I said over the lesson I went through the motions, and before I knew what was happenin’ the machine begins movin’ right under me. I chokes down a gasp, bugs my

HONK, HONK!

eyes out, and takes a death grip on that steerin' wheel. First we does a dive to the right, then a swoop to the left, like a pink seagull with a jag on.

"Easy, easy," says Slat, kind of soothin'. "This is no serpentine course. Whirl it gently. And don't hold it so hard; it won't get away from you. Little more gas now. That's it! You're doing fine."

Maybe I was; but every nerve and muscle in me was strung as tight as a piano wire. I'd always thought the Drive had a good deal of width to it; but just then it looks as narrow as a footpath.

"Say, ain't there some hundred-acre parade ground handy where I can finish this lesson?" says I. "I—I don't want to mar the scenery any along here."

HONK, HONK!

“Oh, you’re all right,” says Slat.
“Throttle low for this down grade.”

Instead of throttlin’ down, though, I must have throttled up; for we begins to shoot down that little hill as if we was on a roller coaster. But Slat reaches over and slows her up just in time to let me round a curve on two wheels.

“Now let’s see you stop just beyond that tree,” says he.

“Wha-a-t?” says I.

“Stop her!” says he. “You’re going to run over a man, or into a wagon! Now stop!”

Say, we stopped all right. I grabbed all the levers I could at once and jammed down on all the foot pedals I could find.



TIDWELL'S TRYING TO TURN WITHOUT CLIMBIN' THE SHADE TREES.

HONK, HONK!

Oh, yes, we stopped! I come near keepin' right on over the dash; but the wheel caught me in the bread basket and set me back solid with my wind gone. Slat must have been lookin' for some such act; for he had his feet braced.

"Fine!" says he, real sarcastic. "Especially for the tires. You've killed your engine, too."

"The blamed thing got what it deserved, then," says I.

"Crank up and try that again," says Slat, "only do it this time the way I told you."

So I gets out and begins turnin' the front handle. Say, ever notice how easy most of them shuffers can whirl that thing? Well, I've got some little right arm ginger my-

HONK, HONK!

self; but I sure was red in the face by the time I'd given the crank three or four turns, and all that comes from the machine is a kind of low, hollow cough, like it was in the last stages.

“Perhaps you'd have better luck if you turned on your spark first,” says Slat, springin' his grin on me.

“Ah, say!” says I. “What a humorous kid you are!”

But I pushes over the button, and with another turn I had her hummin'. Next time he told me to make the stop I did it more careful; but at that I must have missed something, for just as we fetches up more or less gentle, the engine goes out of business again.

“What's your right foot doing on that

HONK, HONK!

pedal?" says Slat. "I thought I told you three times how to——"

"I know," says I. "I've got a brain like a cup custard."

Ever have to put your tail down like that and own up what a thick thatch you've got? Honest, if I'd been a school kid bein' jacked up for forgettin' his lesson, I couldn't have felt any cheaper. And nobody'll ever guess how much I wanted to quit the game. But I couldn't.

"If you know what to do," Slat goes on, "why in thunder don't you——"

"It's this way, Slat," says I. "My head knows it; but my feet don't. Not yet. I've got to educate 'em a little more. If you're willin' to take the chances, though, I'm goin' to learn to run this blasted ma-

HONK, HONK!

chine right here! If I don't, I'll buy it of you and burn it on the dump."

"That's the way to talk!" says Slat.
"Get your mad up, and then you'll do it."

V

WELL, sir, that's the right dope. I don't know how it come to me, or when I passed the butter-fingered stage; but I sets my teeth hard, puts my mighty intellect on the job, and inside of an hour I was doing the trick—runnin' her along as straight as if she'd been on rails, slowin' up, stoppin', backin', and even turnin' around.

All the way on the return trip down the Drive it was me that held the wheel, and before we struck Broadway again I was leanin' back against the cushions in the cockiest style you could imagine.

Now, I try to cut out the chesty business,

HONK, HONK!

as a rule; but here I was at it, good and hard. Just the feel of that steerin' wheel under my hands, and seein' how tame I'd got all that machinery, set me up so that I could almost feel my shirt gettin' tight across the front. It was great! I ain't had any such sensations since I was a youngster.

"Well," says Slat, as we gets back to Gasolene Row, "it's too bad you're not in the market for a machine; for this one would fit you down to the ground."

I don't say anything to that; but I hops out and walks around her, rubbin' my hands over the polished gas lamps, and pokin' at the tires, and lookin' mighty wise. And the more I sized her up, the better she looked to me.

HONK, HONK!

“Think I’m expert enough to run her out home this afternoon?” says I.

“Why, you could take her as far as Boston, if you wanted to,” says he. “All you need now is practice. Of course, if you don’t care to buy, I suppose I can——”

“As a friend, Slat,” says I, “about how much more would you stand me up for than if I was a stranger?”

I knew I was a goner; so I thought I might as well show my hand. Maybe he stuck me, and maybe he didn’t. Anyway, I writes my check right there on the wheel, and after I’d had some oil and gasolene put in her, and bought my license numbers, I starts for Rockhurst-on-the-Sound.

HONK, HONK!

No use goin' into details about that trip. I knew the road fairly well, havin' gone over it in other bubbles; so I didn't get off the track. I had a few close shaves; but gettin' through 'em all right only made me chestier'n ever. And all I could think of in the back of my nut was what a surprise party I was going to spring on Sadie when she sees me roll in all alone and handlin' the wheel myself.

Say, I had that tableau mapped out seven different ways across the board. First it was with Sadie discovered at an upper window, expectin' to see me come hoofin' it up the walk, and wavin' joy signals to me with both arms. Then I had her on the veranda and almost fallin' backwards in her rocker at the sight. Maybe

HONK, HONK!

some of the neighbors would be there to help her throw a fit.

The only times I had a chilly feelin' along my spine was when the horrible thought struck me, what if she shouldn't be on hand at all, and miss my grand entrance?

VI

SHE was there, though. As I turned in through our front gates I see her out on the lawn, with little Sully in his perambulator.

“Honk, honk!” says I, gettin’ busy with the horn and speedin’ up a little extra.

“Why—why, Shorty!” she squeals, after one look.

I just grins and locates the spot where I meant to make my grandstand finish and step out to receive the plaudits of the fam’ly. There’s a little lattice-work summer house just to the left of the drive, and I’d framed it up that to stop just in front of that would make a good picture.

HONK, HONK!

All I did, too, was give one twist of my head and wave a hand at Sadie.

But that was one frill too many!

Next thing I knew I'd made a swing to the left, I hears a great crackin' and splinterin' of wood, and hanged if I don't find that I've got that dinky summer house affair up on the radiator hood, with the machine makin' full tilt at a big maple tree less'n a dozen feet away.

Funny how quick things can happen in an automobile, ain't it? I had just sense enough left to jerk back the emergency brake and bring her up with one of the gas lamps barely grazin' the bark. Then I shuts off the engine and begins to hear some of the things Sadie is shoutin' at me.

HONK, HONK!

“Why, what did you do that for, Shorty?” says she, runnin’ up.

“That?” says I, pointin’ at the hood decoration. “Oh, just for practice.”

“Practice!” says she.

“Sure!” says I. “Thought that summer house might be a cute place to keep the machine in; but it don’t quite fit, does it?”

Course, Sadie didn’t let me get away with any such jolly as that, and the grand ovation I’d counted on somehow missed fire.

All she said was, when I explained how this was my own private machine, that I’d bought all by myself and meant to run back and forth from town in:

“You’d better get some one to drive it for you, Shorty. Then it will last longer.”

“Huh! Think so?” says I. “Well,

HONK, HONK!

see here, Sadie! I want you to understand that I'm going to handle that machine myself! Maybe there's a few stunts I ain't up on yet; but I'll get 'em, if I have to burn up all the gasolene you could load on a lighter! Why, before I get through, I'm going to have that car so it'll stand on its hind legs and eat sugar out of my hand!"

No, I ain't quite reached that point yet. Nor I ain't been pinched for bustin' the speed limit, and I haven't begun cuttin' notches on the cover of my coil box; but I've scorched my fingers on a hot sparkin' plug, and I've got pump blisters on my palms, so I guess I'm comin' on. Anyway, I can look at Tidwell now without grittin' my teeth.



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